

Drawing A Motion on Death

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Abstract

“The young, the old, the dumb, the wise, death awaits them.”

Phya Anuman Rajadhon

This paper is a discussion of the conscious and unconscious creative approaches and processes employed to create the installation animation on the theme of Death for the exhibition, ‘Dialogic’ at the Bangkok Arts and Culture Centre in 2011. The commissioned exhibition was inspired by writings about Thai culture by Phya Anuman Rajadhon. The installation was a creative collaboration with his granddaughter, performance artist Pattarasuda Anuman Rajadhon, Bua.

The conscious method for the animation construction used narrative theories to help structure and create the four projections for the maze, which the viewers had to walk through to reach Death and /or rebirth. Animation means to breathe life into *something* so the creation of animation to represent ‘Death’ is perhaps more of an oxymoron. The unconscious process was employed to create animations that are of memories not yet experienced or seen (*jamais vu*), depicting the cultural theoretical emotive state and experience of Death as explored in 1960’s Thailand by the great grandfather, now passed, of Bua: adding a further dimension of memory and association.

The key representation of Death in the projections is one of memory and the space between life and death, a continuous and ever present part of life’s cycle

‘This is death and the end of the journey and the beginning’

Pattarasuda Anuman Rajadhon

To conclude the paper will discuss the audience experience of the installation and animation

Introduction

In life we will all have one surety, we will all die.

Phya Anuman Rajadhon

To structure the process for the animation projection the narrative theories, as presented by Well's (1998) in *Understanding Animation*, were used to help structure and create the four projections for the maze. The aim was to use Metaphor, Associative Relations and Penetration - *The animating of a memory*, in particular, to reveal the internal space, in this case of something, culturally and traditionally represented, collectively accepted but which is (as yet) unknown, hidden or incomprehensible to any viewer in life. Animation means to breathe life into *something* so the creation of animation to represent 'Death' is something of an oxymoron.

Each animation was constructed as cyclical sequence to act as a multi linear viewing experience with the four screens projecting simultaneously in continuous loops. The images created were taken from orthodox views on death and re-presented to enable each viewer to experience a set of images juxtaposed in a unique sequence creating a new narrative allusion for their individual interpretation. Therefore the aim was to create animations that are of memories not yet experienced or seen (*jamais vu*), depicting the cultural theoretical emotive state and experience of Death as explored in 1960's Thailand by the great grandfather, now passed, of my creative collaborator: adding a further dimension to memory of family identity, memory and association.



Picture 1 : Outline drawing copied from Bua's original plan with projection added

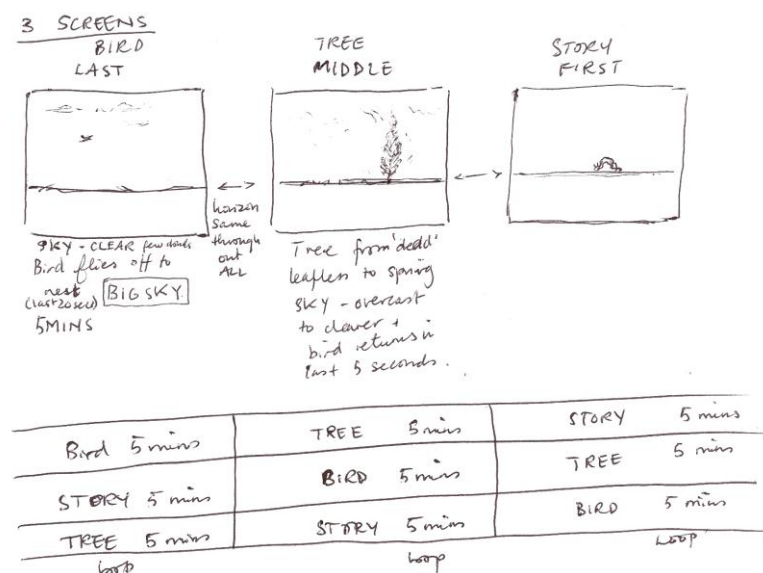
The initial concept was set to convey the theme that humans and other living things all eventually have to die. The idea was that the audience's experience of the installation would open a dialogical discussion that may urge them to create and make the best of today, for tomorrow is not certain. Rajadhon, 2011 stated, "the exhibition would consist of a maze built of dried dead lotus flowers. This maze stands for our life, a journey, a path surrounded by death. From the ceiling, hangs a bunch of fresh lotus, upside down, to let it dry. Flowers represent life. Therefore the lotus stands for life and intellect, which will soon be taken over by death. The video/ animation is projected onto the right wall. At the end of the maze, a big piece of white cotton fabric is hung from the ceiling.

The overall representation is conceptual of the video is of memory and the space between life and death, a continuous and ever present part of life's cycle"

Whatever exists, exists, and will always exist.

Phya Anuman Rajadhon

The presentation format and structure played a major part in the audience's reception of the work. The animations were to be constructed as cyclical loops which act as a multi linear format, as there are four screens, each of which will project simultaneously and continuously looping. The audience would be entering from the right hand side so screen 1 would appear on the right, Screen 2 centre and Screen 3 on the left when one faced the right hand wall.



Picture 2 : Outline screening plan

Materials

The content for the screens were outlined as follows:

Screen 1: caterpillar travels from the body and never returns (cause of dying)

Total 15 mins Repeated

-Dying as a journey

-Animals, which serve as vehicle of the dead

-Living

(See Image 3: Storyboard)

5 mins

(Sequence 2)

5 mins

(Sequence 3) _____ 5 mins

Screen 2: Tree

Total 15 mins Repeated

Appears dead (winter) and gradually comes to life (Spring)

In the last 10 seconds a bird flies in and flies to the tree

5 mins

(Sequence 3)

5 mins

(Sequence 1) _____ 5 mins

Screen 3: Bird

Total 15 mins Repeated

A near empty sky with a few clouds

In the last 20 seconds a bird appears and flies from left to right

It leaves the screen in the last 10 seconds

5 mins

(Sequence 1)

5 mins

(Sequence 2) _____ 5 mins

Screen 4: (initially same as Screen 1)

Total 15 mins Repeated

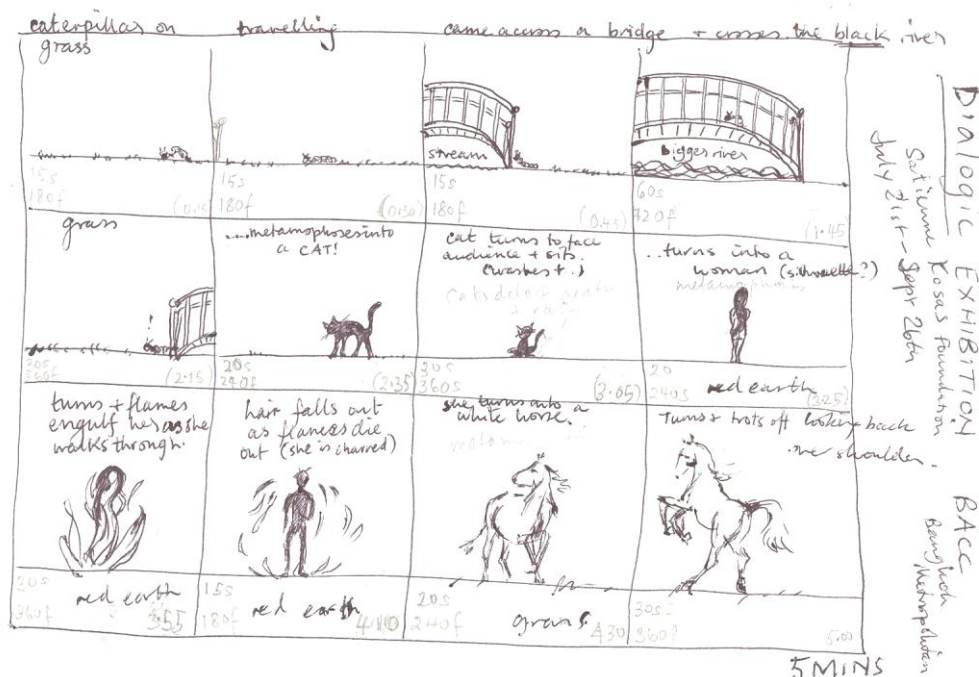
Caterpillar travels from the body and never returns (cause of dying)

- Dying as a journey

- Animals, which serve as vehicle of the dead

- Living

The content for the caterpillar story was explained with a short storyboard:



Picture 3 : Storyboard

The animation brief had a few fixed ideas for setting the symbolism to represent:

1. Caterpillar Buddhist interpretation of the vehicle for the life that leaves the body travels from and never returns (cause of dying)
2. The bridge a Japanese ornamental garden style the bridge was to expand as the caterpillar crosses giving a feeling of endlessness/ hopelessness between life and death (or new life)
3. The river from Greek Mythology the rivers between the Living and Hades (hell)
 - i. Acheron the river of woe
 - ii. Cocytus the river of lamentation
 - iii. Phlegethon the river of fire
 - iv. Lethe the river of forgetfulness
 - v. Styx the river of hate
4. The cat the fear that many cultures have of cats around the bodies of the dead and the dying
5. The woman the ritual of Sati, derived from the Hindu Traditional story, she was the wife of Shiva, reborn as Parvati. According to some accounts she died by throwing herself onto the sacred fire.
6. The fire - immolation to kill yourself or someone else, or to destroy something, usually by burning, in a formal ceremony
7. The horse the Navajo Indians vehicle for the dead

The interpretation was left open to convey these symbolisms in whatever style, image and motion the production process would evolve into. The approach to the topic was to harness the exhibitions inspirational theme as interpreted by Rajadhon, (1961) “*Dialogic means the point where the art of finding logics meet. It is the art ‘of the space in-between, in the middle’. And it is fluid, reflective and always changing*”. Particularly the aspect of ‘*fluid, reflective and always changing*’ concept was the key element in the experimental approach. Animation, being a fixed, time based medium is seen and experienced usually in a set time frame by a static audience in a darkened seated room. This multi screening fluid situation takes on a new role as a player/performer where there is a changing light environment, where the audience is traversing passed choosing when or if they will watch the screens: which, in their continuous looping, are multi-linear and never seen in exactly the same circumstance and therefore completely open to the audience (now performer’s) experience and their individual interpretation. This seemed fitting for the topic of ‘Death’, of which, in life, none of us can really know; therefore a representation of the philosophical apophysis ideas of never being ever able to truly conceive of (a) God.

Can a caterpillar larvae know anything of the ‘higher’ world of a butterfly’

Buddhist Philosophy

In order to create the imagery for ‘Death’ experiments were made with a variety of animation production processes, to enhance the conceptual ideas. The emphasis was to achieve an organic form, using metamorphosis as the principle transition in the narrative structure. In creating the images the main concern was the metaphysical reality not how things look, but what they mean. There fore to create suggestive images, open to each individual’s interpretation and to incorporate the deterioration of the image by the variations in the light situation in the gallery. The venue for the exhibition installation had a great deal of natural light which ‘bleeds’ into the screening wall, which at mid-day almost completely obscures the images. Therefore each person passing through the maze will also experience the animation in differing lighting circumstances and thus will receive their own individualized sequence of images to interpret their own perception of ‘death’.



Picture 4 : Projection in afternoon light



Picture 5 : Projection in evening

The outline for the techniques and processes employed for each film sequence and an outline key elements used.

1. Scene: The empty sky and the bird sequence.

This was the simplest of the three sequences to create: a sequence of photographs taken of small 'sunny day' clouds, which were reconstructed in Adobe Photoshop frame by frame to give a slow transitions with a slightly odd motion across the empty frame for a 5 minute sequence. The gradual movement if you stand in front of the screen aimed to recreate the disconcerting motion feeling when you stand and stare at the clouds on a clear day for a long time, reminiscent of the disorientating feeling that the world we stand on is really a small planet moving around through space (which it is; but rarely do we consciously feel or face this fact). A slight bluish filter was added to the sequence to make it appear more like the illustrated skies of childhood stories. It aimed to maintain a dreamlike vision, an ideal perception of death. A bird, which appears from the left in the final 20 seconds, a small simple v shape, flies across and out the right hand side. (Then re-appearing onto the screen to it's right when the sequences play simultaneously in the original order. Then in the final round of the continuous looping it flies out of the right screen and appears back in on the left screen. This intentional connection between screens gives a kind of infinity continuum with a trip up 'falling out of bed only to find yourself back in bed' dreamlike quality to the three loop's viewing experience.

2. Scene: The Tree sequence

Under-camera painting was used as the means to create a fluid organically growing sequence. The 300gsm watercolour paper was soaked with rough brush strokes of water. The aim was to add texture to the potential of the paint's flow on the paper, so it would not be even and totally predictable, but an element of random flow would give a fluid organic feel to the movement on the screen.

The hand and brush were edited out in Final Cut Pro. The sequence was experimented with a few times as the random variables: including the changing natural light in the filming room and the improvised painting of the tree image meant practice was needed to achieve the desired outcome. Each version made had its own idiosyncrasies depending on the amount of water on the paper, brush used, the different natural light circumstances etc.

To enable some consistency the rule of 3rd's composition set up was used for the horizon and the placement of the tree plus the basic idea that the tree is initially 'dead' looking and gradually metamorphosed back to life. This was to try to create a balanced and pleasing visual landscape on the screen. The 5-minute composition created a condensed notion of the changing seasons from winter to spring. As a background a different sequence of clouds was photographed and reconstructed as animation to fit the timing giving a surreal quality to the sky-scape's changing light. Death is after all a landscape as yet unseen, one might assume perhaps it has similarities to life, but time and motion may well be compressed and condensed. To complete a gradual change of colour was added to the clouds going from a cold grey through to a deep red. This added a symbolically representation of a sunset and therefore the end of the day; or alternatively it could be interpreted as a move toward a more red hot hell! The entrance of a bird in the last 10 seconds of the film flies in from left to right and lands in the tree. The bird symbolised the possibilities of life in or after death, the resurrection or rebirth. Essentially it is a representation of hope, where we cannot know for sure what is at the end of the journey between life and death.

3. Scene: The Caterpillar sequence

*What the caterpillar perceives is the end; to the butterfly is just the beginning.
Everything that has a beginning has an ending. Make your peace with it and all will be well.*
Buddhist saying

This is visually, symbolically and creatively the most complex sequence, with set pieces of imagery to be included, which were derived from different conceptually unconnected sources (Buddhism, Hinduism, Navajo etc). Therefore the piece as a whole needed a means of connectivity to aid the viewers 'reading' experience. So the drawings for this sequence were all done using a Japanese calligraphy brush. The Art of Chinese and Japanese Brush painting is considered one of the fine excellences; it is both an art form and a meditation. With this conceptual notion of mark making as a means of spiritual connectivity, it gave a suitable starting point to the visualizing of the topic. As none of the given images are of a fixed form the intention was to use a meditative process to realize their various forms.

Following the principles of Edward's (1986) by drawing of the right side of the brain, not conforming to the literal left-sided perceptions, the visualization of the images of the caterpillar, the bridge, the river crossing, the cat, the woman and the horse were created using the simplicity of the brush stroke to guide the line.

The Monarch caterpillar inspired the visual appearance of the caterpillar. It's segmented patterning in mainly black and white allowed for a stylized representation with the ink brush. The aim was to create an image that was stylized in line yet immediately recognizable as the metaphor relating to the caterpillar on screen transition and act as a significant guiding symbolism to the audience's 'dialogic discussion'. The walk cycle was developed in such a way as to be looped with single frame adjustments to develop a variety to the motion and avoid a too much repetition, which could have given a too robot-like movement. The caterpillar's journey traveled across the landscape and over the bridge (to Hades).



Picture 6 : The caterpillar in the clouded landscape Picture 7 :Caterpillar crossing the bridge

The landscape itself was developed with layered textures painted under the camera, the same as the tree sequence. Then clouds added in that enhance the fantasy 'heaven' imagery. The caterpillar clambers up and over the bridge, the design of which was inspired by Japanese ornamental garden bridges, with a lotus like shape on top of the posts to give a visual link to the physical maze that the audience were traversing through. The bridge spans the river symbolic of the river Styx between the living world and Hades. A layered loop of the caterpillar walking was synchronized with the expanding bridge. The river, created from a loop of textures much the same as the landscape sequence, was then layered under the bridge. However this initially gave an unsatisfactory result, and difficulties in fine-tune placement of the caterpillar and motion of the bridge synchronization the where caterpillar appeared behind the bridge not on it. Cloud formations were added in and a sequence of explosions created by splattering paint directly under the camera helped disguise the problems - but more significantly added a stronger visualization of an imagined crossing to hell.



Picture 8 : The caterpillar morphs
into a clam like shell



Picture 9 : Caterpillar metamorphosis
transforms into a teething mouth

Finally using Adobe After Effects a light burst behind the caterpillar and a mask with a spotlight framing the caterpillar on his journey over the bridge, were added to give a foreboding darkness to his journey. As he finally reaches the other side the light returns (suggesting possibly hope?) and once on the banks of the river he begins his metamorphosis. This transformation was aided by using the mirror filter, creating some great mouth like shapes opening as if gasping for air in an almost fetal grub-like shape within a closing shell. These unconscious happy accidents were a key player in the creative process offering variants on possible understanding and readings.

The cat shape was drawn with the ink brush with the brush-line thickening and tapering off. Using the brush to give this gestural outline shape of a cat was a further exercise in drawing on the right side of the brain. Allowing the experienced memory of feeling a cat's shape guide the gestures and build the sequence organically. The nature of a cat's body is very fluid and the gestural strokes of the ink brush as an outline lend themselves to symbolising and suggesting very subtly the motion of the cat stretching and moving on the screen.

The body of a cat is the temporary resting place of very spiritual people
Buddhist saying



Picture 10 : early sketches with ink brush experimentation with woman, cat and caterpillar



Picture 11 : early sketches with ink brush experimentation with woman, cat and caterpillar

This drawing process then aided with the transition through to the woman. There were many difficulties working out how to visualise the woman. The reference for the woman's appearance in the animation is related to the sacrificial act of Sati derived from *the wife of Shiva, reborn as Parvati. According to some accounts she died by throwing herself onto the sacred fire*. Experiments were made with the brush, importantly to express the pain and torment that the act of Sati that the woman entails. *Creating **Sati** the former Hindu practice of a widow throwing herself onto her husband's funeral pyre*. Initially the woman would be dancing as a way of expressing the emotion for this section and so this was the starting point for the sequence.

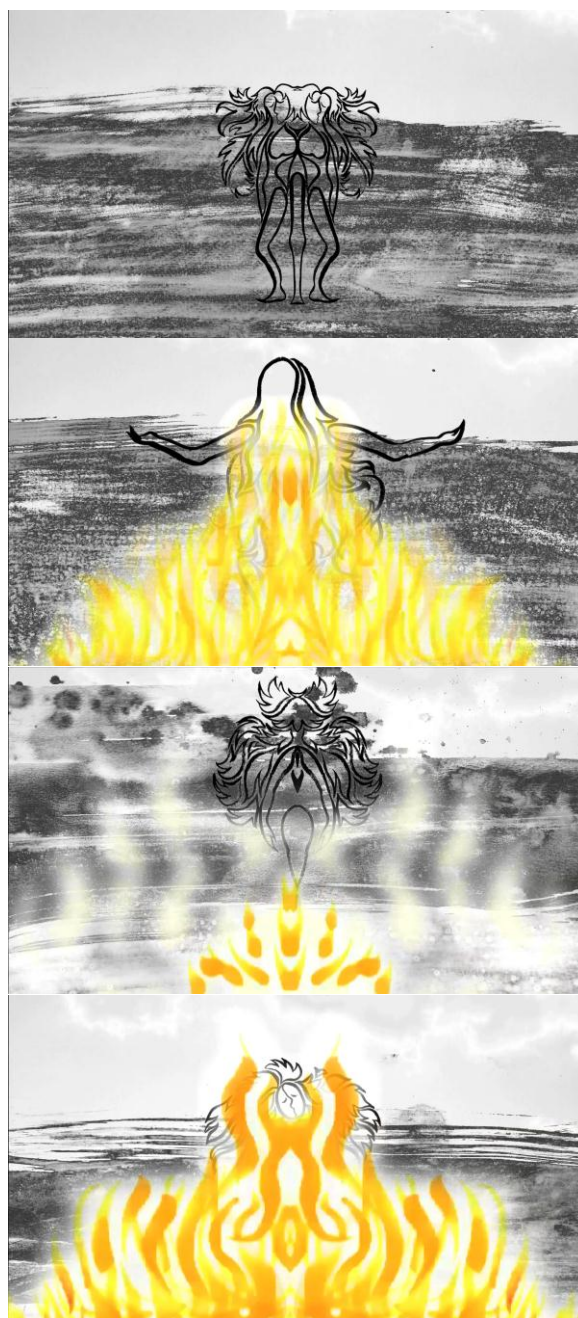
After experimenting with the possibilities for the woman's image to maintain the drawing style of the cat to enable smooth metamorphosis it was realised that the stylised shape that the back of a seated cat has is similar to the form of the 'hourglass' shape of a woman. So the sequence starts with a shape shift from the sensuous curves of a cat to the

equally sensuous curves of a woman. She initially is seen from the back swaying her arms spread out. This was referring to dance movements from both Indian and Thai choreography which use a straightened back and arms out stretched with swaying hand gestures. These swaying steps evolved into the emotion being represented, literally the feeling of burning up inside and being spilt apart, losing one's reference of self and becoming a shell of one's former self as a wife/partner/lover. In post-production a mirror filter was added and this finalised the symbolism of the image.

The sequence was created by exploring the choreography theories (Laban, 1963, 25-51) on basic movement themes as discussed by Wells (1998: 111-121), to create the various emotional expressions.

1. Awareness of body
2. Awareness of the bodies resistance to weight and time
3. Awareness of space
4. A recognition of the flow of weight of the body in time and space
5. The need to adapt to the movement of others
6. A recognition of the flow of the instrumental (functional) use of the limbs
7. An increased awareness of isolated actions
8. An understanding of occupational themes
9. The ability to create different shapes of movement
10. The deployment of the 8 basic effort actions
 - a. Wringing
 - b. Pressing
 - c. Gliding
 - d. Floating
 - e. Flicking
 - f. Slashing
 - g. Punching
 - h. Dabbing
11. Orientating the body in space, playing out the following key tensions:
 - Firm < .> light
 - Sustained < > Sudden
 - Direct < > Flexible
 - Bound < > Free

These principles were applied to the process of mark making, to bring fluidity and flow to the line and weight and direction to the action. Again the use of the Japanese brush enabled the line to vary in it's fluidity and weight adding to the drawing's actions. This was combined with other aspects of visual composition: symmetry, balance; form and shape. The combination of which gave the dancing woman both a realistic feel to the dance action and a patterned visualisation reminiscent of Thai Buddhist art interpretations of the lotus, the flame and traditional Buddhist temple architectural flourishes such as the *chor faa*.



Picture 12 : the sequence dance of Sati getting immolated

There is use of symmetry in the dance of death which allowed for the image to literally and visually split in half, turn in on it self and pull apart. The shapes become stylised and a variety of interpretations can be formed including the lotus flower; an orgasmic pulsating vulva; a beating heart. With the addition of the fire, which is also stylised as yellow brush stroke petals the combined effect with the mirror symmetry tool it too becomes a flower (lotus) in it's appearance, referring back to notions of enlightenment which arguably one can only get in death. Eventually her figure is engulfed, charred and disappears. In this transition the horse, hand drawn following one of the Eadweard Muyerbridge sequences, and coloured, again using the Japanese brush but this time filled to create a more textural look and inverted to appear as a white spectre. It gallops to the place where the burned woman has fallen. It comes in, rears and gallops off. Various animals serve as a vehicle for the dead so perhaps as the mount or vessel for the spirit of the woman. The horse image is representative of the horses that were killed and buried with the dead of the Navajo Native Americans.

Throughout the creating and production of this work the initial ideas suggested by Rajadhon, inspired by those offered in the original texts Rajadhon (1961) in the *Life and Ritual In Old Siam*, *Three Studies of Thai Life and Customs*, pointed in the direction of using of symbolism and metaphor as the creative strategy for the animation. The very act of the audience passing through the space and encountering the maze, the lotus and the projections is itself a metaphor for an individual's journey from life to death. So the use of metaphor in concept and in content parallels the outline of Wells' the theory (1998: 83-89) of the use of metaphor as a narrative structure where by it's use, 'simultaneously invites interpretation but insists on openness. The meanings that may be determined from the use of metaphor resist specificity because they emerge from a second order notion of representation. Metaphors make the literal interpretation of images ambiguous and sometimes contradictory because they invite and engagement with the symbolic over and above the self-evident. This second order of construction offers a parallel narrative to the specific one that merely deals with the construction of logically determined and contextualized event. Whilst the symbol invests an object with a specific, if historically flexible, meaning, the metaphor offers the possibility of a number of discourses within it's over-arching framework.'

Thus the ideas for the Death installation had specific symbolic meanings, which developed through the creative process into allegorical metaphorical interpretations of these and further themes that the images trigger. It was an abstraction which attempts at 'an intriguing spirit and integrity of it's own, that are able to suggest more meanings,' These personal (re-) interpretations were then experienced in a multitude of variables by the audience (performers) who in turn developed their own discourses, or Dialogic, on the theme

Death. As Well's suggests, 'The perception of a person or place is part of the marshaling of creative thought and is concerned with the implicit ordering of feelings and ideas. These are themselves influenced by memory, both of learned knowledge and recalled experience.'

Results

The overall outcome was a phenomenon of associative relations where by the juxtaposition of images associated with Death, both familiar and unfamiliar to the audience, in an installation setting over a period of time creates a new meaning and context to the imagery presented. Prompting new possibility of memories never experienced, for example by seeing a white horse emerging from the clouds and galloping toward the charred remains of a woman juxtaposed alongside the empty sky and a gradually flourishing tree in the rain, whilst traversing through the installation where your way is impeded by a labyrinth of dying lotus buds could but offer a new take on death - to create a Dialogic space about Death. It must be recognised that much of the ideas generated in the creation of this project were often bypassed by the unwitting audience 'performers'. And perhaps that could be a true metaphor of the experience of death itself. One can only speculate on what they made of the images as they hurried or hesitated by. However in a 'Guided Tour on Death', the exhibition tour guide event, an attendee summarise very clearly her experience:

"(To the death)

It is not the death that we should be fearful of, it is the 'life' (instead). There are lots of questions happened when I walked through the maze but the big question is what is the question exactly?

(To the artist)

I like the idea of the whole thing. I have questions but I know the only person who can answer all these questions is me. I don't really know where the beginning of the animation is. But I think you would say it doesn't matter, it is different depending on an individual's experience/thought. Screen 1,2,3 change all the time after each animation ends. That makes a different point of view, when I see it the second time. I guess if I stay longer and see it again, my mind will change the meaning of the animation again. Interesting. Thank you."

To conclude the experiment was to take the theories as presented by Wells for analysing animation, and apply them as a mechanism for developing the creative process, a kind of reversal of function. Rather than use the theories to de-code, they were employed to actively encode the work. To take and engage with the concepts of condensation, metamorphosis, penetration and associative relations and actively apply them into the creative production process is an interesting activity, which opens possibilities in the work,

which would maybe never have been explored. Animation being so time consuming by its very nature, the pre-production planning often has a stifling controlling effect on the experimental possibilities. The resulting installation was received well within the context of the whole 8 artists Dialogic exhibition. The circumstances of the venue were not ideal and the resulting experiences varied. To develop or improve the experience the projections need be in a situation where the lighting conditions could be more controlled. These were outside of the control of the given situation, perhaps like death itself. The results of the film itself were pleasing and did offer a vista for contemplating the journey of death. And did offer the desired effect of an individualised experience where the narrative experienced by each viewer was dictated by their time of entry, time taken to contemplate and the point in the loops that the films were in their cycle. The work produced had a unique result and the experimental process gave possibilities for the imagery and imagination that had never previously been engaged with to create an imaginary text on a subject not yet experienced or seen, jamais vu.

Bibliography

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Gavin Pretor- Pinney, The Cloudspotters Guide. The Science, History and Culture of Clouds. Penguin 2006

apophatis or apophatic someone of the opinion that no matter how devout a Christian you are, you can never really conceive of what God is like, regardless of how hard you think about it. The power of reason can tell us more about what God is *not* than about what He *is*. A Christian may well be able to contemplate the words of God through studying the Bible, and he may indeed be able to communicate with god through prayer, but Monk X claimed that hell never be able to make sense of what God is. He will forever be separated from him by a cloud of unknowing.

Rajadhon, Phya Anuman *Tr Ed GEDNEY, WILLIAM J.* Life and Ritual In Old Siam, Three Studies of Thai Life and Customs (1961) HRAF PRESS NEW HAVEN

Wells, Dr Paul *Understanding Animation* Routledge 1998

Penetration -The animating of a memory of something culturally and traditionally represented, collectively accepted but which is (as yet) unknown to us, the viewer (in life).

Choreography the use of motion in a lyrical and poetic form of rhythm and pattern to create a meaningful expression

Associative Relations the juxtaposition of images familiar and unfamiliar in a setting that creates a new meaning and context

William Morritz, 1988:29 as quoted in *Understanding Animation* by Dr Paul Wells

John Halas and Joy Batchelor quoted from Wells, P *Understanding Animation* Routledge 1998 and initially quoted from Hoffer, T. (1981) *Animation a Reference Guide*. Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press

Exhibition

‘Dialogic’ at the Bangkok Arts and Culture Centre in July 20th – September 25th 2011 Dialogic’ means the point at where the art of finding logics meet. It is the art of ‘the space between, in the middle’. And it is fluid, reflective and always changing. This exhibition is a playground for discussions and aims to fill the gaps between us. The eight artists will base the exhibition/idea from the 8 basal behaviour as Phya Anuman Rajadhon has mapped out in his book of Tradition in Thai Life and Customs: Birth, Age, Illness, Death, Eating Excretion, Mating and Sleeping

Pattarasuda Anuman Rajadhon , Bua. Co-founder of Nuni Productions Opera Company in Bangkok 2007.

Prior Collaborations with author: *Il Campanello*, 2008;

Threepenny Opera 2009;

Wasurachata Unaprom’s *Silent Scream: Journey to the dream of a Murderer* 2010

<http://www.youtube.com/user/millimations/videos> All video works can be viewed on youtube and other writings can be found on www.ajarnccatoon.blogspot.com